



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

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Kids who watch porn won't necessarily turn into sex offenders

Recent media campaigns have made links between children watching online pornography and an increase in sexual assaults by school-aged children.

But is there evidence that the two are linked?

We know that there is obvious public concern in Australia about young people viewing hard core pornography online as evidenced by the Senate Environment and Communications Reference Committee calling an inquiry into the harm done to Australian children through access to online pornography.

We know also of the ease with which children are able to watch porn online, not only on their computers in their bedrooms but on all their mobile devices with access to the Internet with 80% of young people owning or having a mobile phone.

While many children come across pornography online accidentally most girls report feeling sick, shocked, embarrassed and repulsed by it. However boys said they were sexually excited.

However, some young people do intentionally search the Internet to view pornography, although accidental exposure is more prevalent. Of 200 young people in 2002 in Australia, 38% of 16 and 17-year-old boys and 2% of girls reported searching for pornography. Another Australian study in 2006 reported 93% of boys and 61% of girls aged 13-16 years-old had seen pornography and another in 2011 reported 44% had seen online pornography. For both these studies we don't know if it was accidental or purposeful.

It is true that young sex offenders are increasing in Australia as is sexual offending by adults.

Can this rise in young sex offenders be attributed to watching more online pornography?

We know there is more likelihood of children who watch pornography to be sexually aggressive, either physically or verbally, especially if the pornography is violent. This ranges from verbal sexual harassment, unwanted kissing to sexual assault.

We know that popular porn is becoming more violent.

Has there been a corresponding increase in young people watching violent pornography to match the rise in sexual offending?

We don't know.

It is tempting to assume that because young people have easier access to the Internet in Australia that they must be watching more pornography and that the pornography is more violent, but we don't have any current data on that in Australia.

Watching violent pornography is relatively uncommon in the United States and watching non-violent pornography is not related to the perpetration of sexual aggression.

We also don't know if watching violent pornography was the only factor in these young people's perpetration of sexual assault. They could have been abused themselves, they could be using alcohol and drugs or have witnessed domestic violence. They might be acting out from what they see on the Internet or from what they see at home.

As Slade says "some pornography under some circumstances may affect some people in some ways some of the time."

This is not to say that children watching pornography is not harmful. It is.

Exposure to pornography by children leads to beliefs that women are sex objects as women are devalued and degraded by pornography.

Young girls who seek porn show more liberal attitudes to sex and believe it is fine to have sex without affection or love.

Young people who seek out online porn also tend to engage in unsafe sex and are more peer pressured into sexual activity.

However, watching porn doesn't always result in sexual aggression and pornography may not be the only factor in child sexual offending. The main message from a media campaign to parents and teachers shouldn't be one of fear of children sexually abusing others but that watching porn is not a good place for children to learn about sex.

The difficulty is that in Queensland schools are not required to teach sex education even though it is in the national curriculum with the choice to do so left up to the school and its community.

Also many parents are too embarrassed to talk to their children about sex let alone pornography.

Parents, especially fathers need to explain that pornography is staged, it is fiction. Most people do not look like porn “stars” and most people do not behave as they do. Pornography is not a sex manual but if young people cannot find out about the mechanics of sex within a caring relationship they will access pornography to find out what to do and model their sexual life on it.

Parents, teachers and the media all need to talk to young people about pornography but not to give the message that if children do watch pornography they will sexually assault others.